Hugh Bowden

Seeking Certainty and Claiming Authority: The Consultation of Greek Oracles from the Classical to the Roman Imperial Periods

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In the middle of the fourth century BC the Attic deme of Acharnai consulted the Delphic oracle about the erection of altars to Ares and Athena Areia somewhere within a sanctuary for which the deme had responsibility. The god, speaking through his priestess, approved this plan.[1] Some six hundred and fifty years later the *prophetes* at Didyma consulted the oracle there about the erection of an altar to the goddess Soteira Kore in the altar circle within the sanctuary of Apollo. Again, the god approved the plan, and in answer to a supplementary request, proposed that she be referred to as Soteira Meilichos, 'the gentle saviour'.[2] The evidence for both these consultations is epigraphic, and roughly contemporary with the actual consultations, as far as can be judged. Their similarity in terms of subject matter may be taken as evidence for the longevity of oracles, despite the fears expressed by Plutarch and others that the oracles of his day were in decline, and of a remarkable continuity of practice in oracle–consultation.

However this apparent consistency in the functioning of oracles may disguise far more significant changes. Some contrasting features of these two consultations, and of the evidence for them, indicates that they may be serving rather different purposes. The response from Delphi to the Acharnians is found in an inscription recording the decisions of the deme assembly of Acharnai about the altars. It is provided to give context for the debate about how to proceed:

> since the god declared that it was better and more profitable for the deme of the Acharnians and the people of Athens to construct the altars of Ares and Athena Areia, in order that the Acharnians and Athenians may act with piety towards the gods, the Acharnians had proposed…[3]

There is no particular stress on the process of consultation, or even any reference to why the advice of the oracle was sought.

1 *SEG* 21 519 = Fontenrose H27.

2 *DI* 504 = McCabe *IDid* 581 = Fontenrose D30–31.

3 *SEG* 21 519.4–11: ἐπειδὴ ὁ θεὸς | ἀνεῖλεν λῶιον καὶ ἄμεινον εἶναι τῶι δ|ήμωι τῶι Ἀχαρνέων καὶ τῶι δήμωι τῶι Ἀ[θ]|ηναίων οἰκοδομήσασι τοὺς βωμοὺς το[ῦ] | Ἄρεως καὶ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς τῆς Ἀρείας ὅπως [ἃ]|ν ἔχηι Ἀχαρνεῦσιν καὶ Ἀθ[η]ναίοις εὐσ[ε]||βῶς τὰ πρὸς τοὺς θεούς, δεδόχθαι Ἀχα[ρν]||εῦσιν.

It is possible that when the altars were built, inscriptions on them mentioned that they had been erected in accordance with an oracle,[4] but there seems no reason to believe that details of the consultation itself were recorded elsewhere. The response is given in prose, with the typical Delphic formula λῶιον καὶ ἄμεινον ('it will be better and more profitable…'), indicating that the wording of the question provided the text for the answer. The consultation from Didyma is in contrast recorded in an inscription put up for that purpose by the *prophetes* Damianos, who makes it clear that he consulted the god on his own initiative, describing himself as φιλόθεος ('god–loving'). He records the questions he asked, introduced each time by ὁ προφήτης σου Δαμιανὸς ἐρωτᾷ ('your *prophetes* Damianos asks…')[5] and the responses he received, introduced with θεὸς ἔχρησεν ('the god gave the oracle:'),[6] which are in hexameter verse. The inscription provides no practical details about who paid for the altar, or for the inscription (presumably Damianos paid for both) and the overall effect is to focus as much on the piety of Damianos as on the organization of the sanctuary. In this respect it may be compared to other examples of inscriptions recording decisions about cult innovations advocated by individuals to which we will return later.[7]

The comparison between these two inscriptions illustrates the issues I wish to investigate. It is the argument of this paper that the role of oracle–consultations in the Roman imperial period was actually fundamentally different from their role in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. In classical Greece oracles were consulted on matters where there was genuine uncertainty as to how to proceed. In many cases these consultations concerned matters of cult, which might seem inconsequential when compared with matters of interstate relations and military policy, but still required a decision to be made.[8] Records of consultations from the imperial period are often, it will be shown, more concerned with displaying the consulter, or someone else, in the best possible light: they are part of a wider culture of individual self–display. An argument that there was a significant change in the way oracles were consulted requires the identification of the point when the change happened, and what caused it. Here we will find that the key to this lies not so much in a change of intellectual attitude towards divination, but rather in external pressures, and in particular the impact of Rome on the Greek world.

4 Cf. e.g. *SEG* 12.263.3: κατὰ χρησμὸν. Use of this formula seems generally to start in the Hellenistic period.
5 ll. 2–3, 17–18.
6 ll. 14, 28.
7 Chaniotis 2003.
8 On these issues see Bowden 2005.

1. Consulting Oracles in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC

The classical period is the age of mainland Greek oracles. The most important oracular centre in Asia Minor, Didyma, was destroyed in the Persian sack of Miletos in 494 BCE and only started to function again after Alexander the Great passed through the area in 334.[9] There is no evidence of responses from the other major oracular site in the region, Klaros, before the Hellenistic period. We know of a number of mainland Greek oracles, thanks to lists in Herodotus' *Histories*,[10] but it is only two, Delphi and Dodona, that have provided evidence of consultations in any number.

It is in the works of Xenophon that we find the most detailed discussion of the significance of consulting oracles, and a consistent view of why they should be consulted. In his *Memorabilia* he describes Socrates' advice to his followers:

> He advised them in matters which were determined to act in what they considered the best way things should be done; but in matters where it was unclear how things might turn out, he directed them to consult an oracle about whether it should be done.[11]

This view is also revealed by Socrates' advice to Xenophon in *Anabasis*,[12] and Xenophon himself shows disappointment that the Greek cities did not follow this policy when they met for a peace conference at Delphi in 368.[13] In his *Republic* Plato has Socrates take the same view.[14]

The tendency of modern scholarship has been to take a different approach, presenting consultations of oracles as a mechanism 'to sanction decisions that had already been made, and so to prevent indecision or conflict in a group.'[15] This explanation puts much weight on the ambiguity that was represented as a fundamental feature of oracular responses, especially those from Delphi, despite the fact that such ambiguity is notably absent from the epigraphic record of consultations. It also focuses primarily on 'political' consultations, where the decision might be perceived to have an immediate impact on those consulting, rather than consultations about issues that were truly beyond human control, which included

9 Fontenrose 1988 remains the standard work on the topic. See also Greaves 2012.

10 Hdt. 1.46: Delphi, Abai, Dodona, Amphiaraos (Oropos), Trophonios (Lebadeia); 8.134–5 adds three Theban oracles: Apollo Ismenios, Amphiaraos and Apollo Ptoios.

11 Xen. *Mem* 1.1.6.

12 Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.7.

13 Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.27.

14 Pl. *Resp.* 427b–c.

15 Eidinow 2007, 137. This approach, which Eidinow does not necessarily endorse here, is typified by e.g. Price 1985, 301 and Morgan 1990, 156–157. A more nuanced view is offered by Johnston 2009, 56: 'Divination, as played out at Delphi, was not so much a matter of *solving* a problem as it was of *redirecting* a problem out of a world that human enquirers could only imagine into a world in which their actions could have concrete effects… Consulting Apollo must have been a means of reducing stress as well as obtaining answers – if these two formations are not simply synonymous.'

not only questions about, for example, the erection of altars, but also those concerning plague and other 'natural' disasters.[16] The epigraphic evidence is more consistent with the 'Socratic' explanation than more recent ones. The case of the Athenian consultation of Delphi about cultivation of the Sacred *Orgas* of the Two Goddesses in 352/1 BC, demonstrates this point well.[17] The inscription which records the Athenians' decisions about what to do with the Sacred *Orgas* addresses two distinct questions: where boundary markers should be placed to identify the edges of the sacred land, and whether part of the sacred land should be let out for cultivation to raise money for improvements to the fabric of the sanctuary of the Two Goddesses at Eleusis. At the time of the decree, the land was being cultivated.[18] The first of these two issues, which concerned a pre–existing, but currently unmarked boundary – is something that could, in principle, be determined by human wisdom, and the Athenians establish a commission of fifteen citizens to discover the answer, by taking advice from the Eleusinian officials and any other Athenian citizen who has something to contribute. Presumably they were relying on the collective memory of those who knew the area. The second question, whether or not the Goddesses wished the land to be cultivated, was not something mortals could establish on the basis of reason: and therefore an oracle had to be consulted.[19] The fact that the oracle responded negatively to the request to continue farming the land, thus leaving the Athenians in need of an alternative income stream to fund the works in the sanctuary, suggests that the consultation was entirely genuine.[20] This same combination of applying practical wisdom to practical problems, and turning to oracles for those matters where practical wisdom cannot provide an answer, is advocated in a work more or less contemporary with the decree, Xenophon's *Poroi*.[21] The Sacred *Orgas* decree is unusual in the detail it provides about the circumstances of a consultation of Delphi.

The distinction between what can be achieved by human wisdom and what needs to be put to the gods is not simply a distinction between secular and sacred matters. There are many aspects of cult activity that can be determined without specific consultation of an oracle, on the basis of existing practice – what is generally referred to as 'ancestral custom'. But the introduction of new festivals, albeit organised in accordance with traditional practices, may result from a con-

16 See e.g. Bowden 2005, 110–113.

17 *I.Eleusis* 144 = IG ii^2 204 = RO 58 = Fontenrose H21: see also Lambert 2005, 132–135. Discussions: Rhodes/Osborne 2003, 272–281 (with earlier bibliography); Bowden 2005, 88–95; Clinton 2008, 138–143; Papazarkadas 2011, 244–259.

18 There is no scholarly agreement about what precisely the land then under cultivation was: see previous footnote.

19 The theory of Papazarkadas 2011, 249–250 that the Athenians were taking advantage of Phocian control of Delphi in 352 to get a response that suited their own political needs is rather far–fetched.

20 The response of the oracle is not recorded on the inscription, but known from fragments of Androtion (*FGrH* 324 F30) and Philochorus (*FGrH* 328 F155).

21 Papazarkadas 2011, 248 points in particular to Xen. *Vect.* 4.19, 6.1–2.

sultation of an oracle. We have a number of inscriptions recording details of the creation of new festivals, where we have reference to consultations of oracles, but not necessarily information about the circumstances of the consultation. Examples of this are the festival of the First Fruits in Athens in the mid–fifth century,[22] and that of Artemis Leukophryene in Magnesia on the Maiander at the end of the third century.[23] These cases show another important role for oracles: granting authority. In the period before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War the Athenians established (or perhaps re–established) a festival in honour of the Two Goddesses, and instructed Athenian citizens and their allies to bring a proportion of their wheat and barley harvest to Eleusis, and they also invited all other Greek cities to do the same, 'in accordance with ancestral custom and the oracular response from Delphi'.[24] It is not clear when or why the oracle was consulted on this issue, but for the Athenians in this case what was important was not recording why they consulted the oracle, but demonstrating that the action they proposed had the authority of Apollo behind it. This is reinforced by Isocrates' reference to the same practice, which he justifies with a reference to Delphi:

> Indeed, about what ought we to trust more than about those things which the god ordains, and on which many Greeks agree, and words spoken long ago support current achievements, while what is happening now is in accordance with what was said by men of those times?[25]

In the case of the festival of Artemis Leukophryene it seems clear from the inscriptions put up in the city that the Magnesians consulted Delphi after an epiphany of the goddess in their territory. Those cities which agree to support the athletic festival established at Magnesia indicate in their decrees (copies of which were inscribed in Magnesia), that they are doing so in accordance with this oracle.[26] The case of Magnesia demonstrates continuity in the early Hellenistic period with the practices, and by implication the theological understanding, of the preceding period.

As well as establishing its festival, the city of Magnesia also made a claim for territorial inviolability (*asylia*), a practice that started in the 260s BC, and continued until AD 22–3.[27] In the third century other cities also cited oracles from Delphi and elsewhere in support of claims for *asylia*: Smyrna,[28] Antiocheia of Chrysaoreis[29] and Teos.[30] It is however noticeable that the claim of oracular

22 *IG* i^3 78 = *I.Eleusis* 28 = Fontenrose H9. Bowden 2005, 125–129.

23 Fontenrose H45. Cf. *I.Magnesia* 16–89. Rigsby 1996, 179–279, Parker 2004, Sumi 2004, Sosin 2009.

24 *IG* i^3 78.4–5, repeated at 25–6, 34: κατὰ τὰ πάτρια καὶ τὲν μαντείαν τὲν ἐγ Δελφῶν.

25 Isoc. 4.31: καίτοι περὶ τίνων χρὴ μᾶλλον πιστεύειν ἢ περὶ ὧν ὅ τε θεὸς ἀναιρεῖ καὶ πολλοῖς τῶν Ἑλλήνων συνδοκεῖ, καὶ τά τε πάλαι ῥηθέντα τοῖς παροῦσιν ἔργοις συμμαρτυρεῖ, καὶ τὰ νῦν γιγνόμενα τοῖς ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνων εἰρημένοις ὁμολογεῖ;

26 E.g. *I.Magnesia* 61.39: κατὰ τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ χρησμόν.

27 Rigsby 1996, 3.

28 Fontenrose H42.

29 Fontenrose H43.

30 Fontenrose H46, *Didyma* 11.

authority is not used in campaigns to gain *asylia* after 200 BC.[31] Although there may be many reasons for this, it is worth noting that from the second century BC onwards any claim for *asylia* would have to be made in ways that they would persuade the Romans, who by then were rapidly becoming the dominant power in the Greek world. As we will see, the authority of Greek oracles appears to have had limited influence on them.

Socrates' advice about consulting Delphi as described by Xenophon was aimed at individuals rather than cities. While there is no shortage of accounts of individuals consulting oracles on their own behalf in Greek literature, there is little good surviving documentary evidence for individual consultation at Delphi. On the other hand we do have a large number of enquiries from individuals recorded on lead tablets found at Dodona.[32] The published examples from Dodona do include some examples of state consultations, and these include questions very similar to those put to Delphi in the period, for example:

> The Corcyreans and Oricians ask Zeus Naios and Dione to which of the gods or heroes they should sacrifice and pray in order that they may best and most securely govern the city, and have a rich and fruitful harvest and profit from all the good produce.[33]

Most however are from individuals, asking about travel, disease, having children and other personal concerns. It is difficult to establish much about the enquirers at Dodona, except that they come from a relatively wide geographical area in central Greece and Magna Graecia, and were mostly men.[34] But an analysis of the questions they ask supports the idea that they were seeking answers to questions which they could not establish by other means. As Eidinow puts it, 'it is likely that any number of the inquiries made at Dodona were made by individuals who [had no other party to persuade and did not seek to build consensus, but] wanted to acquire a sense of certainty about particular situations for themselves alone.'[35]

It is the search for certainty in an uncertain world that explains the significance of oracles in the classical and early Hellenistic period, for both cities and individuals. Oracles can provide certainty because of their authority, which comes from the gods. What we will see in later periods is that enquirers are less

31 But see Tac. *Ann.* 3.63, where the city of Smyrna refers to the oracle it had received to justify maintaining the *asylia* of the sanctuary of Aphrodite Stratonike: *nam Zmyrnaeos oraculum Apollinis, cuius imperio Stratonicidi Veneri templum dicaverint*.

32 Catalogues of responses: Eidinow 2007, 72–123, Lhôte 2006, 29–325.

33 Lhôte No 2: [θ]εός. ἐπικοινῶνται τοὶ Κορκυ–
ραῖοι καὶ τοὶ Ὡρίκιοι τῶι Διὶ τῶι Ναί–
ωι καὶ τᾶι Διώναι τίνι κα θεῶν ἢ ἡ–
ρώων θύοντες καὶ εὐχόμενοι τὰ–
ν πόλιν κάλλιστα οἰκεῦεγ καὶ ἀσφα–
λέστατα καὶ εὐκαρπία σφιν καὶ πο–
λυκαρπία τελέθοι καὶ κατόνασις παν–
τὸς τὠγαθοῦ καρποῦ.

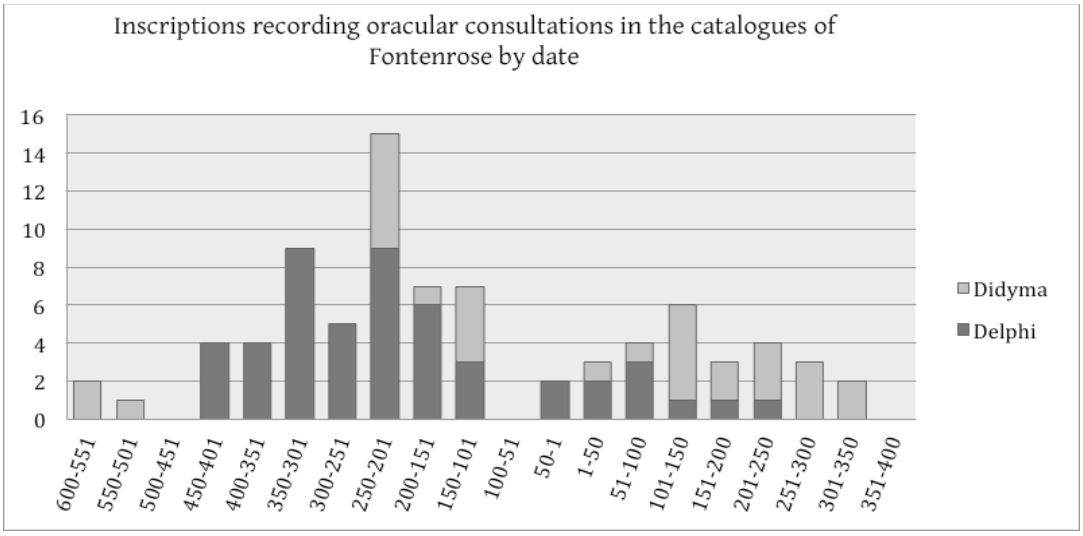
34 Eidinow 2007, 128–131; Lhôte 2006, 429–430, 449.

35 Eidinow 2007, 137.

concerned with uncertainty, but that the issue of authority gives oracles a role in the changed world of the Roman empire.

2. Oracles: Decline and Renewal?

'The decline of oracles' has been a topic for debate since at least the time of Plutarch. The factors which determined how frequently, and for what purposes, the major Greek sanctuaries were consulted by cities or individuals in the Hellenistic and Roman periods are not simple to identify, and debate has swung in various directions. The tendency of earlier generations was to see the oracular sanctuaries as losing their importance from the fourth century BC, if not earlier, associating the 'decline of oracles' with the 'decline of the city–state'. More recently this has been challenged by those who emphasize the on–going vitality of Greek religious practice, to the extent of suggesting that there was no 'decline' at all.[36] It is not easy to quantify the evidence for consultations, but a very crude measure can be made by considering the number of inscriptions referring to consultations of the two most prominent oracles, at Delphi and Didyma.[37] Didyma was destroyed in the sack of Miletos in 494 BC, and only started to operate again in the reign of Alexander the Great: there is no evidence for a break in the functioning of the Delphic oracle. The counting of inscriptions however suggests that there was a significant drop in activity at both sites in the first century BC, and then a recovery during the imperial period.



36 e.g. Bendlin 2011, 209: 'The actual demand for divinatory specialists and mantic techniques was unbroken: the oracle at Delphi was visited by the same kinds of individuals and groups in late Hellenistic times as earlier, and the questions concerned the same topics, namely ailments of various kinds and personal or family problems. In this respect, they do not differ from the cases brought before the Delphic god in Plutarch's day.'

37 Data taken from Fontenrose 1978, 244–267, Fontenrose 1988, 179–208.

The continuing significance of oracles in the early Hellenistic period (i.e. the third centuries), and well into the late Hellenistic period fits with a view that Greek civic religion was in fact still flourishing in the period, most recently demonstrated by Nadine Deshours. She sees the Mithridatic Wars as bringing to an end an 'Indian Summer' of Greek civic religion, noting:

> Évidemment la religion civique n'est pas morte avec les Guerres mithridatiques. Elle a, cependent, connu un hiver, voire une glaciation avec des abandons de sanctuaires dans plusiers regions. Elle fut à nouveau éclatante à Athènes sous Auguste, sous Hadrien et même au iv[e] siècle.[38]

In the case of oracles, it was not simply the disruption of the wars that had an effect on the practices of those who consulted them. Strabo, in the course of his description of the oracle of Ammon in Libya, offers a more general comment about oracular shrines:

> Among the ancients both divination as a whole and oracles were held in greater honour, but now there is great neglect of them, since the Romans are satisfied with the Sibylline oracles, and with the Etruscan divination through the entrails of animals, flight of birds, and omens from the sky.[39]

In several places he remarks on the poverty of the oracular sanctuaries that do continue to function, and notes the abandonment of others.[40] On the basis of this contemporary evidence it is difficult to deny a real decline in the position of oracles in the first century BC. But the inscriptions point to something of a recovery of interest in the imperial period, both at Delphi and at Didyma, and to these can be added the evidence for consultations of Apollo at Klaros, from which all the epigraphic examples belong to the Roman imperial period.[41] The impression given by the inscriptions is supported by Plutarch's indication that Delphi, 'after earlier drought and solitude and poverty' was in his own time experiencing 'abundance and brilliance and honour', thanks to the work of the current 'leader' (presumably the emperor Hadrian).[42] In fact the epigraphic evidence suggests that Delphi was consulted at least as much in the century before Plutarch's time as in the following century, although the figures are too low to tell us much. It is clear that imperial patronage brought benefits to Greek cities, even before Hadrian's time, but it would be a mistake to assume that it did not also have an effect on the activities of their leading citizens, including their attitude to oracles. Plutarch also notes a contrast between the supposed ambiguity (λοξότης) and obscurity of the oracles of the past and the over–simple form of contemporary responses,[43] although here he probably has in mind the verse oracles quoted by

38 Deshours 2011, 15–16. Cf. Bendlin 2011, 208–212.
39 Strab. 17.1.43. Cf. Plut. *Mor* 411e–f.
40 Poverty: 7.7.9–10 (Dodona), 9.3.8 (Delphi), 11.2.17 (Phrixos); closure: 5.4.5, 8.6.22, 9.2.34, 10.1.3.
41 Stauber/Merkelbach 1996.
42 Plut. *Mor.* 409b–c.
43 Plut. *Mor.* 409c.

authors such as Herodotus,[44] rather than any archival evidence. Nonetheless this suggests that he and his intellectual readers might not accept the idea of 'business as usual'.

Under these circumstances we should not assume that there was a straightforward continuity of use of oracular sanctuaries. They may have continued to function, but not necessarily to the same purpose as is earlier periods. There are some features of the way consultations are presented on stone that support this view.

3. Inscribed oracles and catalogues

For any modern scholar studying the role of oracles in Greek society it would seem a natural thing to start by compiling a catalogue of responses.[45] Such catalogues generally combine literary and epigraphic evidence, albeit drawing attention to questions of reliability of the literary sources. Their presentation aims primarily at indicating as far as possible what question the enquirer asked, and what answer the god gave: often one of these things has to be guessed on the basis of the other. Thus Fontenrose's Delphic catalogue lists the following: Consultant, Occasion, Question, Response, followed by some information about the way the information appears in the ancient source(s). In his Delphic catalogue question and answer are provided only in English, and no surrounding text is quoted. In his later Didyma catalogue, the additional information includes the original surrounding text from which the question and/or answer have been taken, in Greek with English translation. Nonetheless the focus remains on the moment of consultation. In their publication of the oracles from Klaros, Merkelbach and Stauber achieve something of the same effect by printing the text (and translation) of the responses themselves in larger type than the surrounding text, even when the opposite is true on the stone itself.[46]

The consultation of an oracle is however usually part of a larger process, and often needs to be understood in that broader context. We have already considered Fontenrose's H21, 'Question of letting lands within the Eleusinian *orgas*'.[47] The inscription recording the decision to consult the oracle is mainly concerned with the establishment of a commission to identify the boundaries of the *orgas*, and the (re)placing of *horoi* to mark them. Furthermore, the instructions for how to organise the consultation of Delphi make it clear that the significant events will be played out in the Athenian assembly rather than at Delphi itself: public officials perform actions before the people, and gold and silver vessels are carried to and

44 Plut. *Mor.* 403e.

45 For Delphi see Parke/Wormell 1956; Fontenrose 1978; Bowden 2005; for Didyma: Fontenrose 1978, 417–29; Fontenrose 1988; for Klaros: Stauber /Merkelbach 1996.

46 e.g. Stauber/Merkelbach 1996, 17–19.

47 Fontenrose 1978, 251.

from the acropolis.[48] The visit to Delphi is something of a sideshow. Some consultations are known only because an inscription referring to an activity notes that it was done 'in accordance with an oracle': again the moment of consultation is secondary to the actual proposal being made.

When thinking about consultations of oracles, we should think about the whole context of the consultation, from the initial decision to seek the advice of the god to the final decision to publish (or not) the details of the enquiry. The decision to publish maybe as significant for us as the decision to consult. When examining literary accounts of consultations, it is natural to ask why the author is presenting the story to us in the way that he does. We should take the same approach to the accounts of consultations that come to us from inscriptions. Another example may help to put this in context.

We have an inscription recording an honorific decree from Paros from c. 180 BC detailing the decisions of the boule and demos of the Parians in response to an embassy from their daughter city Pharos, off the Illyrian coast.[49] After the main set of proposals there is a supplementary proposal to send an embassy to Delphi to determine to which gods the Parians should pray for the continuing prosperity of Paros. Below this is inscribed 'The god delivered the oracle' followed by a verse response of at least three lines (most of the text is lost). Fontenrose assumes that this is the start of the response of the god to the enquiry referred to in the preceding text.[50] While this is possible,[51] it is unusual to find a verse oracle quoted in this kind of context. The verse text starts with the words 'The Parians to send Praxiepes … to the west'. This looks like the opening to a foundation oracle. And in this context the quotation of the supposed original oracle given to the Parians when they sent out a colonising party to the Adriatic would make sense: Diodorus records that the Parians founded Pharos in response to an oracle,[52] and including the text of a foundation oracle in a later decree is certainly not unparalleled.[53] The missing text at the start of the decree may well have included instructions for the republication of the original oracle as part of the honours for the ambassadors (who might have included a descendent of Praxiepes). If this interpretation is correct, then it shows how references to oracles in inscriptions can serve a range of purposes. In this case we have one reference to a consultation of Delphi on a well–established question, 'to which gods should we pray?', with no response noted, but also the inscribing of an earlier response from Delphi, in verse, as a

48 Bowden 2005, 92–93.

49 IG xii supp. 200; Fontenrose H56.

50 Fontenrose 1978, 262 'R. They should send Praxiepes to the west … [the rest of the response, in which the deities to whom they should sacrifice are named, has disappeared.]'

51 Cf. Dem. 21.52, which quotes a verse oracle that appears to answer the question, 'to which god should we pray': the text opens with a line describing the Athenians, then suggests which gods to honour in which ways. Of the third line of the Parian inscription, all that survives are the letters […] ωμου [...] which on this interpretation might be βωμούς.

52 Diod. 15.13.4.

53 Cf. e.g. the case of Cyrene: *SEG* 9.3 = ML5.

way of honouring visitors from another community. As I will show, in the Roman imperial period it is this use of oracles to show honour that becomes dominant.

4. Inscribing Oracles

Before we examine this in detail, it is important to recognise differences between practice at different oracles. We will focus on the three sanctuaries from which there are sufficient responses for useful catalogues to have been created: Delphi, Didyma and Klaros.[54] The question of the mechanism by which oracular responses in the form that we find them in the literary and epigraphic record were produced is a vexed one on which there is no scholarly agreement.[55] However, for our purposes the important question to ask is, in what form was it considered appropriate to present oracular responses in published documents? Here there is a difference between Delphi on the one hand, and Didyma and Klaros on the other. It is clear that 'official' versions of Delphic responses might be recorded in prose or in verse. Greek cities which consulted oracles kept records of these consultations in some kind of archive. From at least the fourth century BC these archived responses might be recorded in verse or in prose: three such archived oracles are quoted in the texts of Demosthenic speeches, including one in verse, which is presumed to have come from Delphi.[56] On the other hand it is clear that in the fourth century BC the normal expectation was that Delphic oracles would be initially delivered in prose,[57] and throughout its history there are very few examples of verse oracles from Delphi recorded on inscriptions.[58] The only one from before AD 125 is that to the Parians discussed above. Fontenrose lists only three Delphic responses from inscriptions dating to the second and third centuries AD, but all three are in verse.[59] This is obviously a very small number, but it contrasts with the picture provided by Plutarch in his Pythian dialogues, written probably just before or not long after AD 125, which emphasise that the oracle was not then giving verse responses. At Didyma in the archaic period we have no evidence for verse oracles, and three inscriptions recording responses in prose. However from the time of its renewal around 334 BC, all the 'published' texts of

54 It would in principle be possible to include Dodona as well (Lhôte 2006), but the published evidence is rather different in form, and does not go into the Roman imperial period.

55 e.g. Bowden 2005.

56 Dem. 21.51–52, 43.66.

57 When they consult the oracle about the Sacred Orgas in 352/1 the Athenians compose alternative responses for the god in prose: IG ii^2 204.24–30.

58 Fontenrose 1978, 11–57.

59 H66 = *IG* ii^2 5006, from Athens, which is too fragmentary for us to be able to establish the context of the inscription; H67 = *I.Magnesia* 228, from Magnesia on the Maeander (which Fontenrose indicates may actually come from Didyma or Klaros); H68, from Tralles. It is worth noting that the latter two inscriptions are from Asia Minor, where, as we shall see, there was an expectation of oracular responses being inscribed in verse.

oracles from Didyma are in verse. Similarly all the published versions of responses from Klaros are in verse. All but one of these are from the Roman imperial period.[60] It seems clear that enquirers at these sanctuaries expected to receive responses in verse.

With all this in mind, we can now turn to examples of inscriptions recording responses of oracles in the Roman imperial period, and consider not only why the oracle was consulted, but also why the response was recorded and displayed in the way it was.[61] The examples will be drawn now from Asia Minor, from Didyma and Klaros. A first example is from Didyma, around AD 120, concerning, on the surface at least, the order of works on the theatre:

> Shall E——, Epigonos, and the builders, contractors for the part of the theatre of which the superintendent is the *prophetes* of the god, the hero Ulpianus, whose employer is the architect Menophilos, undertake the placing of the arches and vaulting and carry it through, or should they consider another task?'

The answer, recorded on the same inscription, was the following three lines of hexameter verse: 'It is advantageous to you, praying to Pallas Tritogeneia and to valiant Herakles with sacrifices, to make use of the building skills and the counsels of an able and excellent man.'[62]

W.H. Buckler included this in his discussion of labour disputes in the Roman province of Asia, suggesting that the Epigonos and his workers wanted to break a contract for some reason.[63] Fontenrose suggests other possible interpretations, for example an argument between the contractor and Ulpianus or Menophilos, or 'some pious scruple' – whatever that might mean.[64] But all of these suggest that there was a serious issue to be settled, and that asking the god was the best way of settling it. Such an approach fails to explain an important fact: the inscription was put on display in the finished theatre. This suggests that some at least of the men who are named on it actually wanted it widely known that they had consulted the god, which hardly makes sense if the point of the consultation was to settle a dispute which would have no significance once the building works had been completed. Rather, by putting up the inscription, those involved are drawing attention to the building work in that area, and announcing that it had been carried out in accordance with the god's wishes. The answer from the god is not so much a solution to a problem as a commendation of the possibly now dead Ulpianus, and the consultation was intended not to solve a problem, or answer a question which was not answerable on the basis of human wisdom, but to emphasise the qualities of those who had been involved. A second inscription can be interpreted in the same way.

60 Based on the catalogue of Stauber/Merkelbach 1996.
61 On consultations in this period see Busine 2005.
62 Fontenrose, *Didyma* no 19.
63 Buckler 1923, 34–36.
64 Fontenrose 1989, 194.

Alexandra, priestess of Demeter Thesmophoros at Miletos at some point in the second century AD asked the god at Didyma:

> Since from the time when she assumed the office of priestess never have the gods been so manifest through their appearances, partly through maidens and women, partly also through men and children, why is this, and is it auspicious?[65]

On the same stone is a separate response from the god, which directly addresses Alexandra and praises her for her devotion to Demeter.[66] These consultations, like that about Ulpianus, were private, but they are rather different from the consultations by individuals we know from the material from Dodona. Those are recorded on pieces of lead, never meant for publication, and their questions were about personal matters where the enquirers had no other means of getting an answer. Divine signs and epiphanies, as we have seen, were in earlier periods the occasion for consultation of oracles by cities, as at Athens and at Magnesia on the Maiander. In these cases the divine activity was recognised as something of significance to the whole city, requiring a public response. Here however the emphasis of the inscription is very much on the involvement in the events of Alexandra herself, and her enquiry is not asking for advice but for an explanation.[67] It is not a public document, but one put up by, or on behalf of, Alexandra herself, to draw attention to her virtues, not to find any kind of certainty.

The clientele of Didyma in this period appears to have been predominantly made up of individuals from Miletos. From Klaros we have rather more examples of state consultations, but the inscriptions recording these share features with those from Didyma. An example is the oracle given to Caesarea Troketta.[68] Here we have a consultation prompted to an outbreak of plague, where the advice given is to erect a statue of Apollo Soter. We know of this consultation not from a decree of the city, but from the inscription on the statue base itself, which records that the statue was erected in response to the oracle from Klaros, and paid for by Meiletos, son of Glykon,[69] the priest of Apollo. The statue base also has the response itself recorded on it, consisting of 28 lines of verse, mostly hexameters, but with some other metres included. Such a lengthy and showy response, which includes rather gory descriptions of the effect of the plague upon the city, might seem out of place as an answer to a straightforward request for help. When read on the statue base it has a different effect, emphasising the service to the city of the man who dedicated the statue and so brought an end to the suffering. The statue and base are in effect a monument to Meiletos as well as a dedication to Apollo, and associates the priest closely with the words of the god he serves.

65 Fontenrose, *Didyma* no 22.
66 Fontenrose, *Didyma* no 23: see discussion Fontenrose 1989, 197–198.
67 *I.Didyma* 496.7: τί τὸ τοιοῦτο καὶ εἰ ἐπὶ αἰσίωι.
68 Stauber/Merkelbach no 8.
69 On this name see Stauber/Merkelbach 1996, 19.

5. Displaying piety

We may put these displays of oracular responses into a broader context by comparing them with other inscriptions recording acts of piety by prominent individuals. In an investigation into 'negotiating religion in the cities of the Eastern Roman empire', Angelos Chaniotis draws attention to a number of decrees of cities recording innovations in their cult activities sponsored by leading citizens, dating between the mid–first and the third centuries AD.[70] In one of his examples, dating from 162–4, Amoinos of Ephesos proposes that the month of Artemision be dedicated in its entirety to Artemis.[71] As Chaniotis describes the inscription:

> The content of the decree is made up of only a few words (1. 27–32). The assembly decided to dedicate the entire month Artemision to Artemis. The rest of the text – the *narratio* (ll. 8–27) and an hortatory formula (ll. 32–34) – summarise the arguments used by Amoinos.

Chaniotis is interested in how men like Amoinos were able to get their proposals accepted by their cities, and he therefore focuses on the kind of argument used. But it is also interesting to look at the way the individuals proposing legislation come across in the inscriptions. Chaniotis notes the personal piety that appears to characterise their behaviour. In the case of another proposer, Damas of Miletos, who served more than once as *prophetes* of Didyma he notes:

> He was not interested in money contributions; and his measure was certainly not aiming at increasing his popularity… Damas was interested in keeping a religious tradition alive, possibly simply for the sake of tradition, possibly out of a conservative interest in ancestral practices, possibly because of the cultic significance of the celebration he aspired to revive.[72]

But Damas and Amoinos were presenting themselves to their fellow citizens, and possibly to a wider audience, as advocates of piety, and in this respect they have some similarity to the individuals who chose to record the oracular responses they had received. The Ephesian decree records a summary of the speech that Amoinos made to the city about Artemis and her worship across the Greek world: he draws attention to her past benefactions to Ephesos as well as to the fact that her cult is spread across the world. In making the proposal Amoinos was associating himself with the goddess and her cult in a similar way to Alexandra of Miletos when she used the oracular response from Didyma to associate herself with the divine epiphanies that had taken place during her term of office. The two individuals were each turning to one of the two sources of authority that had been available to Greek communities through the ages, ancestral practice and the words of an oracle.

70 Chaniotis 2003.
71 *LSAM* 31.
72 Chaniotis 2003, 183.

6. Conclusions

If we were to focus on the narrow issue of what enquiries were put to oracles by individuals and communities in the period from the fourth century BC to the third century AD, we might conclude that there was a remarkable level of consistency. Enquirers asked whether they should dedicate altars and other things, or what they should do when faced with plague or natural disasters, or what to do when signs were seen in the sky. But even if it were the case that people continued to be faced with the same uncertainties, it was always the case that oracles were only one of many places to turn to in search of answers to those questions that could not be solved by the application of human wisdom. As Bendlin puts it: 'oracles like Delphi … were competing in the religious market–place with numerous 'low' forms of mantic services.'[73] And this was true throughout the period we are considering. Under these circumstances, the questions that need to be asked are: why did those who consulted oracles choose to use that method of divination rather than another? Why did they choose to record the fact of the consultation? And why did they chose to record the oracular response in the way that they did?

The answers to these questions differ quite significantly from the classical to the Roman imperial periods. For a start, even though individuals were consulting oracles on their own behalf in the classical and early Hellenistic times, there are very few cases where this fact is recorded on a surviving inscription.[74] We tend to know about such individual consultations from literary sources, or in the case of Dodona from the lead tablets on which questions were recorded, which were clearly not intended for public display. Instead, the majority of consultations recorded on inscriptions are made by cities, and the consultations are recorded as part of the usual civic business of the community. In contrast, in the Roman imperial period at Didyma most of the consultations are by individuals – often those who hold offices at Miletos or Didyma, including the *prophetes* of the oracle, but it cannot be assumed that they are acting in an 'official' capacity.[75] At Klaros, where a number of consultations by *poleis* are found in the epigraphic record, the inscriptions providing this information are not decrees of the *polis* but paid for and erected by individuals. The practice of putting up verse texts of oracular responses is much more widespread in the imperial period than earlier, and although this in part reflects a higher proportion of responses from oracles in Asia Minor, there is more to notice. The verse oracles on inscriptions, although often verbose, are never cryptic in the way that verse oracles quoted by, for

73 Bendlin 2011, 209.

74 An apparent exception is Fontenrose H34 = FD.3.1.560 from c. 360 BC, which appears to be about a man seeking children. But this inscription, entirely in verse, and describing a miracle, is by no means a straightforward record of an oracular consultation.

75 Damas, who proposed reintroducing dinners at Didyma, as Chaniotis discusses, held a number of major offices, but his decision to make innovations in cult were apparently prompted by personal considerations: Chaniotis 2003, 183 (see above).

example, Herodotus tend to be. In the classical period Delphi had a reputation for obscurity, and as we have noted, this has been taken by scholars to be a necessary characteristic of its responses. But we may contrast the 29–verse response from Klaros given to Pergamon instructing them how to respond to an outbreak of plague,[76] with the 24–verse oracle from Delphi given, according to Herodotus, to the Athenians when faced with Xerxes' invasion in 481 BC.[77] There are some noticeable parallels between the two responses, but there is no doubt what the Pergamenes were being asked to do, while the lack of clarity of the response to the Athenians, with its reference to the 'wooden wall', is well–known. All of this suggests that to describe oracles going through a 'renaissance' in the Roman imperial period is at best an oversimplification.[78]

The power of Roman emperors in the Eastern Mediterranean world was presented in religious as well as military–political terms: emperors were gods.[79] This fact, whatever its other implications, backed up by the emperor's ability to demonstrate his power and his favour immediately, affected the relationship between Greek cities and their (other) gods. Faced with disaster, Greek cities could turn to the emperor as well as to their oracles, as they did in AD 17 when the province of Asia was struck by an earthquake.[80] Authority in religious matters in the empire might also be assumed by the Roman senate, as when *asylia* was investigated in AD 22–23: alongside oracles and ancestral custom, the traditional sources of authority, loyalty to Rome was now something to be taken into account when claims were made for recognition of religious claims.[81] The arguments that had been presented by Magnesia on the Maiander, when it had initially sought recognition for the festival of Artemis Leukophryene, and the asylia of the sanctuary, had relied on its assertions of divine epiphanies, backed up by reference to an oracular response from Delphi: now it appealed to the decisions of Scipio and Sulla.[82] Tacitus' account of these events, written at the time of the supposed 'renaissance' of Greek oracles, does not suggest that he found the religious assertions of Greek cities particularly impressive.

In the world created by Roman power, religious priorities in Greek cities clearly changed. One of the features of the new religious landscape was the role of individuals in taking responsibility for looking after the affairs of the gods. We see examples of this in the proposals made by individuals for religious innovations in their cities, often paid for by the proposers themselves.[83] And at the same time we see individuals in effect seeking recognition for their achievements from the gods, by making enquiries about their activities at oracles, or taking on the task of

76 Stauber/Merkelbach no 2.
77 Fontenrose Q146–7 = Hdt. 7.139.5–143. See Bowden 2005, 100–7.
78 e.g. Lane Fox 1986, Parke 1985.
79 Price 1984.
80 Tac. *Ann.* 2.47.
81 Tac. *Ann.* 3.60–3.
82 Tac. *Ann.* 3.62.
83 Chaniotis 2003, discussed above.

publicising the results of their cities' enquiries when those are still made. If we return to the pair of consultations with which this paper began we can see the transformation. In the mid fourth century BC the deme of Acharnai agreed to build two new altars. We know the name of the person who proposed that the altars be built, Kalliteles son of Stesios,[84] but we are told nothing more about him; nor do we know from this inscription who was responsible for proposing that the Acharnians consult Delphi in the first place. We are told that everything is being done 'so that the Acharnians and the Athenians might act properly towards the gods.'[85] At the end of the third century AD, when Damianos, *prophetes* of Apollo at Didyma, proposed to erect an altar to Kore Soteira, he recorded the question he asked the god, which included the claim that he was god–loving (φιλόθεος) and pained by the omission:[86] although the altar is to be erected in the sanctuary at Didyma, by a leading official, it is nonetheless entirely an individual matter. Finally it is worth noting that nothing in Damianos' two questions to the god suggest that he 'wanted to acquire a sense of certainty about [a] particular situation':[87] to the contrary, his assertion that the lack of an altar to Kore pained him, and his graceful proposal that Apollo be allowed to give Kore her new 'auspicious and hymnic title'[88] suggest considerable confidence in his own judgment. In this case therefore, one of the principal reasons why people consulted oracles in earlier periods was missing. However, the other reason, the authority the decision of the oracle could provide, can still be seen to be relevant, at least amongst those who came to Didyma and saw the inscription.

This new way of using oracles in the Roman imperial period can be seen as a case of religious individuation, resulting from the increasing individualisation that has been taken to characterise the society of the Roman empire in this period.[89] Bert Musschenga distinguishes between '*individualisation* as an objective process of social change, *individuation* as development of personal identity, [and] *values of individuality* which express views on personal identity that emerge in the process of individualisation and are used to legitimise that process.'[90] The people who consulted Didyma in the second and third centuries AD were concerned with their own individuation in a way in which consultants in the fourth century BC were not. Roman period consultants used the responses they received from oracles deliberately to advertise their own individual virtues, while those of earlier periods did so in the service of the state. The eclipse of Greek states by Roman power took away an important function of oracles, and as a result they lost a significant *raison d'être*. But they therefore became available for redeployment to serve new purposes in the period when they were apparently reborn. Institutions

84 *SEG* 21 519.2.
85 *SEG* 21 519.8–10.
86 McCabe *IDid* 581.7–8.
87 Eidinow 2007: 137 (see above).
88 McCabe *IDid* 581.25–7.
89 As for example in Foucault 1986.
90 Musschenga 2001, 5.

that had developed to serve communities faced with the uncertainties of life became in some circumstances the agents of individuals whose main anxiety was to project their own status in a world which the Romans had made rather more certain.

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